

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 26, 2011

“Helen Isn’t with Us Anymore”: On December 26, 1946, 65 years ago, my mother put in a long-distance call to Middletown, Delaware. She seldom phoned as it was too expensive; letter-writing, back and forth, was prolific. The call was not to her sister, Helen, or to either of her two brothers who lived there but rather to the home of the three Brady sisters. Clara Brady Green, a widow, lived with her two unmarried sisters, Ethel and Helen, in the old Brady homestead on North Broad Street about ½ mile from downtown Middletown. The three had been invited to Christmas dinner at Auburn Heights the day before, and I provided their round-trip transportation in my 1940 Packard 110. Aunt Helen Shallcross had been with us for a few days before Christmas, and she returned to Middletown with us when it was time to go home late Christmas afternoon.

As we left Yorklyn just before dark, Aunt Helen was on the front seat with me, and the three Brady sisters were on the backseat of the five-passenger sedan. We passed through Hockessin and were heading down Valley Road. There was almost no traffic, but two or three dogs were playing in the middle of the road. Fully expecting the dogs to disperse as our car approached, I slowed only slightly. However, when the dogs remained in the road a more aggressive stop was required. All seemed well, and I started to move ahead in low gear, when Ethel Brady announced from the back seat, “Helen isn’t with us anymore.” I stopped, looked toward the backseat, and indeed there were only two. Apparently, as I made the sudden stop, Helen Brady, seated on the right side, had gone down on the door handle, the “suicide” rear door opened, she clung to its handle, made a very brief stop on the running board as she swung around and fell gently to the road surface. As I jumped out and rushed back to help her up, she insisted she wasn’t hurt, and she climbed back into the car. (The generations raised with seatbelts may find this hard to believe, but there were no seatbelts in cars before the 1960s.)

My Aunt Helen (not to be confused with Helen Brady) laid me out for careless driving, but we proceeded on to Middletown with no further problems. When I dropped off my passengers and returned to Auburn Heights, I told my mother of the incident. She called the Bradys’ home and was assured that Helen was alright. None of us could really believe she was “alright,” so on December 26, my mother called again. From what we could learn, Helen Brady never had any repercussions from her fall, she was the only one of the three sisters to drive a car, and she lived to be 103, passing away about 1988. Ethel Brady, the one who provided the news that Helen wasn’t with us, was a freckled comedian who loved birdwatching. Clara Green, the oldest of the three, passed away first, and the other two continued to occupy the old house that began falling apart. When I last saw it in the late 1980s, it was unoccupied, and the growth in the surrounding yard almost obscured it from view. In the 1990s, it was razed.